

# 13. The Americanization of the Holocaust. On the Possibility of Externalizing Evil and Perpetually Renewing One's Mission

Anyone who travels to the various regions of the United States in search of its current culture of remembrance and politics of its history would be well advised to pack Friedrich Nietzsche's essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in their luggage. In it, Nietzsche had warned the Germans in 1872, and all energetic peoples in general, against exaggerating the scholarly approach to history, which supposedly aims at objectivity. For only the pre-scholarly approach, arising from the needs of the respective present, could serve life and, as one would say today, create identities. The anti-Enlightenment philosopher Nietzsche recommended three appropriations of history for use by groups who understand themselves as a people: first a monumental-heroic approach, second a critical approach, and third an antiquarian approach. Respectively, peoples and individuals reassure themselves of their great past as an incentive for the future; they indict the past and criticize it, also in order to gain strength for new deeds; or they cultivate a stewarding relationship towards the past in order to remember the roots of their own existence.

Although there are more historians in the United States than in the rest of the world combined, this energetic nation has a deep skepticism toward intellectuals and thus follows Nietzsche's suggestion. It simultaneously cultivates an antiquarian, a critical and, above all, a monumental-heroic-patriotic approach to history. This is in contrast to the Germans, for whom the third part of this triad, precisely the patriotic one, was largely lost through National Socialism and the Holocaust. For the majority of Americans, their history is steeped in victory and success. Anyone who seriously questions this American legend can still today be swept away by a storm of indignation.

Nietzsche can also provide the key to explaining one of the most astonishing phenomena of contemporary memorial culture in the United States: the ubiquity of the Holocaust in politics and culture,

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that is, its Americanization. Two phenomena in particular should be understood by this: first, the fact that the Holocaust has moved from the margins to the center of American culture in the past 30 years; second, the functionalization, trivialization, and marketing of the “Shoah business” that has accompanied it.

### **Embodiment of Absolute Evil and Manslaughter Argument**

The confrontation with and commemoration of the genocide committed against the Jews in Europe have become deeply imprinted in the collective memory of Americans under the term “Holocaust.” At every turn, the foreign visitor encounters the products of a culture of research, education, and remembrance that has become institutionalized in museums, memorials, and research centers, at universities and schools, and that continues to grow through donations and fundraising and is designed to last. The greatest impact, however, is not achieved through words and serious research, but through images, through the marketing of the Holocaust in the mass media. Moreover, the Holocaust as the embodiment of absolute evil has become the all-around killer argument in current political and moral discourses in the United States. No symbol is ascribed such diverse meanings as the Holocaust; no analogy is more used and more abused than the Holocaust analogy.

Over the past 30 years, the Holocaust has not only penetrated the center of American culture, but has also become central to the identity of American Jews. According to a 1999 study by the American Jewish Committee, 98 percent of American Jews consider the memory of the Holocaust to be a significant or very significant part of their identity, but only 15 percent say they observe religious rules and maintain Jewish customs. That the Holocaust has taken on a whole new meaning in American society is in no small part due to the change in self-perception of American Jews – in many respects the most successful minority in the United States since 1945 as seen by their prominence in politics, business, culture, academia, the mass media, and among opinion-forming elites.

It was predictable that the tension between Americanization, on the one hand, and the significance of the Holocaust for the identity of American Jews, on the other, would eventually trigger a new wave of reflection and critique. This is precisely the trend that seems to be emerging at present among some American historians and intellectuals.

Even earlier, some Jewish writers had sporadically complained that the Americanization of the Holocaust amounted to a “de-Jewification” of the genocide, a theft of Judaism; or that anything evil that happened to anyone anywhere was labeled a “Holocaust.” But in recent years, the books and essay collections of Tim Cole, Hilene Flanzbaum, Edward Linenthal, Peter Novick, Jeffrey Alan Shandler, and James E. Young have given this critique an empirical basis. Norman Finkelstein’s recently headlined book radicalizes and overstates some aspects of this multi-layered process.

Examples may illustrate the various dimensions of the current Americanization of the Holocaust. Let us begin with one of the greatest museum successes in the history of the United States, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., which opened in 1993. It now attracts more than two million visitors a year. Despite the fact that the museum’s origin can be traced back to 1978, and was the result of the impact of *The Holocaust* television mini-series, as well as a gesture of appeasement toward American Jews because President Jimmy Carter needed a domestic political compensation for the delivery of F-15 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia, it has since become a national shrine. The museum shows Americans what it means to be an American by drastically demonstrating what it means not to be an American. To critics who doubted at the time that it made sense to document the greatest crime committed by a foreign people on another continent in the American capital, the advisory board responsible for the museum’s conception responded, “This museum belongs at the center of American life because America, as a democratic civilization, is the enemy of racism and its most radical expression, genocide. As an event of universal significance, the Holocaust is of special importance to Americans. The Nazis denied, in word and deed, the deepest beliefs of the American people.”

If this statement is meant to imply that Nazi ideology and rule negated the ideals and values of American democracy, it is undeniably true. Incidentally, this is true for all societies and states for which human dignity and physical integrity are inviolable. However, if this statement is to be understood as a statement of fact about the history of the United States, the assertion that the United States is the enemy of racism is a grotesque historical misrepresentation not only for the descendants of decimated Indians and for black Americans. For them, who have so far not seen the establishment of a national museum about the fate of Indians or slavery in Washington, D.C.—a place where slaves

were kept in cages and offered for sale—the Holocaust Museum is a privileging of Jews. This contributes to tensions between a segment of African Americans and American Jews.

Almost every major city in the United States now has a Holocaust memorial. There are more than a hundred Holocaust museums and research sites dealing with the genocide, for example in New York, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, Tampa Bay, Houston, and Dallas. The trend is upward. Americans have adopted, as it were, one of the greatest crimes – many believe the greatest crime – in European history.

Another example of the ubiquity of the Holocaust is the coverage in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the two most politically influential newspapers in the country. In 1996, for example, The *New York Times* published more than 500 Holocaust-related articles, The *Washington Post* more than 300, and the trend is upward. From 1996 to the present, the *New York Times* has published more than 3,500 Holocaust-related articles.

But the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* deal only in the printed word. Such impact, however, is far surpassed by images, film, television, comics, and the Internet. The outstanding example in recent years is, of course, Steven Spielberg’s feature film “Schindler’s List,” which was released in 1993, won seven Oscars, and was broadcast again in 1997 by one of the major television networks, this time with the explanation, unusual for the United States, that this film would not be interrupted by commercials. Several new major projects on the Holocaust are also in the pipeline. Spielberg will release a film about Anne Frank. In the American market, the Holocaust has become a profitable commodity.

Moreover, the Holocaust is an integral part of American “infotainment” and political soap operas. When O. J. Simpson’s black lawyer Johnny Cochran declared members of the white Los Angeles Police Department to be Nazis who had started a Holocaust against black youths, Simpson’s second defense lawyer, Jewish lawyer Robert Shapiro, professed on television to have been deeply offended by Cochran’s comparison. The chief prosecutor against President Clinton in the House of Representatives, Congressman Henry J. Hyde, warned the American nation on television of the slippery slope leading to the Holocaust if Clinton was not removed from office for lying publicly about his Monica Lewinsky affair.

Holocaust survivors tell their stories on the smarmy Jerry Springer show; opponents of abortion, supporters of the “pro-life movement”

compare aborting fetuses to the victims of Auschwitz. Animal lovers speak of the holocaust for animals. Even a cookbook with dishes from the concentration camp finds its buyers.

The current situation in America is radically different from the situation during World War II, when the genocide took place, and from the period up to the early 1960s, at the height of the Cold War. In the global threat scenarios that U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt laid out before the American people from 1937 to 1941<sup>1</sup>, he did not refer publicly even once to the threatened situation of the Jews in the “Third Reich” and in Europe. He believed he could not afford to do so politically, in part because of the widespread anti-Semitism in his own country at the time. Therefore, the quota for immigrants was never increased to help threatened Jews. Even if President Roosevelt had fought for it, he would have had no chance in Congress to change the restrictive immigration laws of 1924 in light of the “Great Depression,” the country’s worst economic crisis since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. However, Roosevelt did all he could for the Jews within the existing laws. Even Jewish organizations in the United States remained comparatively passive. The feeling of resignation that little could be done anyway was widespread.

The *New York Times*, bought in 1896 by Adolphe S. Ochs, a son of poor German Jews, stuck to its maxim during World War II that it did not, under any circumstances, want to appear as a Jewish newspaper. It therefore barely mentioned the Holocaust during World War II. In its coverage of the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp on the front page of the paper, the word “Jew” was not mentioned. And despite the elemental disgust that the pictures of the liberation of the concentration camps aroused in 1945, not only in America, a not inconsiderable anti-Semitism initially continued to persist in the country.

As is often overlooked today, Americans’ attention during World War II was primarily focused on the global conflict itself, which was fought across five continents and seven oceans and cost the lives of 50 to 60 million people. The “Holocaust” as a singular event did not yet exist in the consciousness of contemporaries. During the war, few Americans had any idea of the magnitude of the genocide. In May 1945, a majority of Americans estimated that a total of one million people—Jews and non-Jews—had been killed in concentration camps by the Nazis.

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1 See Chapter 8.

The approximately 100,000 survivors of the genocide of European Jews who came to the United States by the early 1950s remained invisible. In a culture of victors, war heroes, and optimism about progress, no one had any interest in their stories of suffering. The majority of American Jews during this period did not want to be seen as victims. Their ultimate goal was to be recognized as full American citizens. In the late 1940s, for example, leading Jewish organizations rejected the proposal to build a Holocaust memorial in New York: It was not in the interest of the Jews to present themselves forever as a weak and defenseless people.

The onset of the Cold War did not make the memory of the Holocaust more opportune. The theory of totalitarianism brought National Socialism and Communism into a common front against the free West. During the witch hunt against alleged and supposed communists at home in the era of Senator McCarthy, it turned out that quite a few “fellow travelers” were Jews. Especially in the Southern states, anti-communism, racism, and anti-Semitism combined. “Commies, Niggers, and Jews” were often mentioned in the same breath.

During this time, the genocide of the Jews was rarely mentioned in public debate. The term Holocaust had not yet become established, the idea of the “uniqueness” of the Holocaust had not yet been born. Moreover, in view of the possibility of nuclear war, Hiroshima was incomparably more important for contemporary thinking than the Holocaust.

The onset of the Cold War also made West Germany America’s most important ally. Although the memory of the Third Reich and the presence of the past played a paramount role in American policy toward Germany from 1945 to the present, the American government was forced to halt denazification, in large part due to the emergence of the Cold War. From 1949 to 1955, the Allied High Commission—the Oberregierung of West Germany—in general, the American High Commission and John J. McCloy in particular, gradually lost control over policy regarding Germany’s past because they wanted to retain control over the present, namely West Germany’s rearmament and integration into the West.

## The Paramount Role of Television

Since the early 1960s, several events and developments have fundamentally changed this situation. It was during this period that what can now be called the “Americanization of the Holocaust” began. In the beginning was the image. Without television, one could say, there would have been no Americanization of the Holocaust. One of the most important events was the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, which was broadcast extensively by American television stations. For the first time, the American nation heard the harrowing testimonies of the survivors, understood the dimension of the genocide. Probably equally important was the potential existential threat to Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973, which brought the two cornerstones of Jewish Americans’ “civil religion” closer together: Israel and the Holocaust. The fear of a possible new catastrophe of the Jewish people mobilized the memories of the Holocaust. Above all, it strengthened the resolve to never again remain silent and to stand idly by and watch the events unfold. It also gave many Jewish communities a new *raison d’être* and scared away the worries of Jewish organizations that the very ever-more-successful integration of Jews into American society and the waning of anti-Semitism were weakening their cohesion and organizational strength. The Holocaust created Jewish ecumenism.

In practical terms, the rekindled interest in the Holocaust proved to be an ideal vehicle for raising funds for Israel, increasing the membership of Jewish organizations, and demonstrating the need for Jewish organizations to take action. In the words of a spokesman for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in California, “The Holocaust works every time.”

A further breakthrough—many believe the decisive breakthrough—to Americanization was then brought about by the four-part television series *Holocaust*, which was seen by almost 100 million Americans in April 1978. Its broadcast was supported by advertising campaigns of Jewish organizations—incidentally, much to the horror of Elie Wiesel, perhaps the most famous Holocaust survivor, who condemned the “trivialization” of the Holocaust as an insult to the victims.

All this would probably not yet have led to the current Americanization of the Holocaust, had it not been for a cultural revolution in America in the 1960s. That, at any rate, is one of Peter Novick’s most thought-provoking theses. What was the content of this cultural revolution? It was the transformation from a dominant culture of victors

and heroes to a culture in which losers and victims also have their say. Since that time, there has been an increased tension in America between the heroic view of history and the critical view of history in the Nietzschean sense. Prompted by the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the revolutionary change in immigration laws, the critical approach to one's own history now gained significance over the heroic-patriotic interpretation.

This critical view of American history has since clearly become the moral weapon of nonwhite minorities, as well as women, in the political struggle for social recognition, ownership, and rights. It began, to quote Peter Novick, as “an Olympic competition for the gold medal for the greatest tale of woe.” And in this contest, American Jews maintain an unassailable lead as long as they can convince Americans of the “uniqueness” and “incomparability” of the Holocaust. All other crimes, including those of American history, thus become secondary and tertiary.

Some African American spokesmen are displeased with the extent to which Jews have succeeded in anchoring the Holocaust in the American public consciousness. They are stepping up efforts to interpret the story of the suffering of African Americans as the “Black Holocaust.” Even John Hope Franklin, an extraordinarily respected black American historian and advisor to President Clinton on racial issues, refers to slavery as “America's own Holocaust.”

While this comparison with the Nazi genocide causes great discomfort among many Jews, more than ninety percent of the members of the House of Representatives have, until this year, refused to deal with a standing motion of the “Congressional Black Caucus,” the association of black members of Congress. Under it, a congressional commission of experts would be convened to “examine slavery, and its impact on African Americans and American society.” After all, possible apologies are also admissions of guilt, and these can be expensive thanks to the American legal system, which awards the unwary consumer several million dollars in pain and suffering for even one cup of coffee that is too hot. In some cases, calculations are in circulation about the reparation of 224 years of unpaid forced labor of 10 million slaves.

Other minorities also want to see “the other side of America” appreciated: The murderous consequences of the European conquest of the two Americas, recently dubbed the “American Holocaust” by a Hawaiian-born American scholar; the extermination and dispossession of Native Americans; slavery and the system of apartheid that ruled the Southern states until a generation ago; the contribution of Mexicans



and other Latin Americans to the history of the United States; the long history of immigration laws discriminating against Asians; in general, the racism deeply embedded in American society.

According to Peter Novick, this new victim culture contributed significantly to the Americanization of the Holocaust. Among other things, this change also made it easier for Holocaust survivors to open up and share their memories. While they almost went into hiding after the war, “survivors” are now sought-after speakers and eyewitnesses. The term “survivor” is now an honorary title. The fact that Hadassah Lieberman, the wife of the Democratic Party’s vice-presidential candidate, introduces herself to voters as the child of Holocaust survivors gives her persona a special aura of dignity and respect.

### **Savior of the World**

While the cultural revolution of the 1960s reinforced the critical appropriation of history and the acceptance of victim culture, however, the most important reason for the popularity of the Holocaust among the 98 percent of the non-Jewish population of the United States seems to be precisely that Americans can confirm themselves in their old role as the savior of the world. The memory of the crime of a foreign people, the Germans, leads at the same time to an externalization of evil and a confirmation of one’s own heroic-patriotic view of history. The reason for the Americanization of the Holocaust lies precisely in the fact that the genocide of the European Jews opens up for Americans both a critical and a heroic approach to history.

Despite the increased popularity of the critical view of history and the new culture of victimhood, the vast majority of Americans continue to maintain a heroic-patriotic relationship with their own history. It is no coincidence that all the “history wars” of the past decades have taken place between the heroic and the critical appropriation of history.

This is consistent with recent polls showing that more than seventy percent of Americans feel “patriotic” or “very patriotic.” Despite discomfort with parts of their own history, this majority, with robust self-confidence, continues to celebrate their great past as a manifestation of their chosenness and uniqueness and as a mandate to the future to fulfill the American mission. American history is conceived as an unfolding process of freedom; the sense of mission has its origins in a secularized 18th-century teleology of history.

American history is encapsulated, as it were, in this ideology of mission; it is, in Nietzsche's view, surrounded by an "enveloping atmosphere" that protects it from too much criticism and leaves it the ability to contribute to the identity of the American nation and to assure itself of its own identity in demarcation from the "other" and the "foreign."

The American civil religion produces the necessary enemy images as needed. Following the pattern of the late antique religious leader Manichaeus, the Americans have interpreted their wars in particular as a radical juxtaposition of a good and an evil world principle. Every enemy was thus automatically caught in the Manichaean trap of the American sense of mission: first the Indians, then England and George III, then the Spanish and Mexicans, and in the 20th century primarily the Germans, Japanese, Russians, Chinese, North Vietnamese, and Iraqis.<sup>2</sup>

The Americanization of the Holocaust, the constant confrontation with absolute evil, gives the American nation the perpetual possibility of externalizing evil and at the same time renewing the necessity of its own mission, the liberal-democratic mission. In the face of the Holocaust, the American nation convinces itself every day anew that it is the only indispensable nation in the world, as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it. The Holocaust has become not only the center of the identity of American Jews, but also an important component of American civil religion. The two million visitors to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., experience this dialectic firsthand: after confronting the overwhelming scenes of inhumanity, they find themselves in the monumental center of Washington—amid monuments to freedom and the American mission. The name of the museum itself precisely captures this fact: *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 2.